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The fate of Acacia

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NOMENCLATURE

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The fate of *Acacia*H. Peter Linder¹ & Mike Crisp²¹ Institute of Systematic Botany, University of Zurich, Zollikerstrasse 107, 8008 Zurich, Switzerland² Division of Botany and Zoology, Australian National University, Canberra, AustraliaAuthor for correspondence: H. Peter Linder, peter.linder@systbot.uzh.ch

Abstract We propose a once-off “special committee” to develop a proposal that could resolve the entrenched positions in the case of the typification of *Acacia*. It is important that such a proposal has a broad, consensual, support, rather than rely on a “winner takes all” approach.

Keywords *Acacia*; botanical nomenclature; conservation of names; International Botanical Congress

The botanical nomenclatural system rests ultimately on consensus. We all agree to follow the rules, there is no outside enforcement. Having a common set of rules makes sense. However, this works only if all agree that the rules are fairly and correctly interpreted. This does not mean that we all agree all the time but rather that we usually take the common good into consideration and learn to live with the decisions even when we don't like them. The issue of the typification of the name *Acacia*, and consequently its application, has become highly divisive and it shows no sign of calming down. This was evident from the beginning: after much discussion the nomenclatural committee just reached the 60% majority needed to retypify the original application of *Acacia*. This was followed by a vote at the Vienna nomenclature session where 54% of the votes cast favored rejecting the Report from the Committee that included retypification of the name (Moore, 2007; Moore & al., 2010; Thiele & al., 2011). Before and after, a heated debate was carried on in *Taxon* and *Bothalia* (Moore, 2007; McNeill & Turland, 2010; Moore & al., 2010; Smith & al., 2010; Thiele & al., 2011) and in some semi-popular journals. The number of authors involved in these papers, on both sides of the argument, attest to significant and widespread support for each case. It is clear that the issue has not “gone away” during the six years since the Vienna meeting.

Instead, the response to this lack of consensus has been a justification of entrenched positions in terms of the rules of procedure, and in terms of “stability”. Both seem to us to be rather inadequate responses, scarcely evocative of Solomonic wisdom we need. Furthermore, this type of maneuver moves the argument from what is “best for the community” to one of “parliamentary rules”, never a satisfying or interesting switch. They might force through a result, but do not inspire confidence and the resulting vitriol is likely to cause damage to relationships within our community. These sort of decisions will also not inspire young taxonomists to become nomenclaturalists; the constant harping by all involved gives taxonomy and nomenclature a “bad name”.

We support the need to find a consensus solution to this problem, and propose the following steps:

(1) A new committee on the nomenclature of *Acacia* and related taxa be set up at the Nomenclature Section of the Melbourne Congress. This special committee should be recognized as the “Committee for the taxonomic group concerned” as specified in Art. 14.12 and 14.14. This special committee would need to be established as a “once-off” amendment to the *Code*, specifically Div. III. 2. Taxonomists with entrenched positions on either side of the argument should not be part of this committee, instead care should be taken to include taxon specialists as well as taxonomists with a broad nomenclatural experience. It is important that this committee has the broad support of the taxonomic community, therefore the 60% rule for its establishment (as it would involve modification to the *Code*) should constitute no problem.

(2) This committee is given an open brief, they should be allowed to seek unusual solutions, and not be limited to a choice between *Racosperma* or *Acacia* for the Australian phyllodinous acacias. It would be authorized to recommend anything that falls within the provisions of Art. 14 and within the mandate of a committee for the group concerned.

(3) This committee should report to the General Committee before the *Melbourne Code* goes into press (maybe April 2012). If the General Committee endorses the results of the special *Acacia* Committee, then the decision(s) of the General Committee could appear in the *Melbourne Code* with an asterisk to indicate that its/their use was authorized subject to a decision of a later Botanical Congress.

We should use the *Acacia* episode to show that the botanical nomenclatural rules system is flexible, fair, and able to seek consensus solutions. This could transform a divisive issue into a demonstration of democratic depth and taxonomic common sense.

(Read and supported by Vicki Funk)

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